

COMPASSION

So Crufts is now over for another year. In Exeter there is a man who daily walks his three-legged greyhound and the love and affection they show to one another makes the physical perfection required for success at Crufts seem superficial. I was struck by the words of one commentator who pointed out that with the fierce competition for Best of Breed or for Champion, our desire for "perfection" is eclipsing other important values we cannot measure. Crufts seems to typify our desire to set targets and fossilise our ideas of what is important.

We don't only find it in business and government, but also very conspicuously in religion. All the major religions in the world started as religions of compassion, of love for your neighbour as for yourself. This is as true of Judaism, Islam and Buddhism as it is of Christianity. But in a very human way, in all traditions and in all countries, we have first condensed the original teaching into a set of rules and then, in all too many cases, imposed the rules while losing the spirit of the original teaching. Repeatedly each Faith has become aware of this drift and has tried to recover its first inspiration, not always an easy matter. In Christianity, for example, the last major attempt at change was what we now call the Reformation - and that led to a war that lasted 30 years, one of the most vicious ever fought in Europe and which resulted in several hostile versions of Christianity as doctrinal boundaries were defined to keep the wolves out and the flock in and somewhere in these changes, compassion became less important than purity of doctrine.

It may be helpful to imagine humanity as a huge stained-glass window in which we are all fragments of glass of different shapes and colours. We have no agreement on of the pattern, if any, and so have no justification to claim that our personal shape or colour is in some way better than another. All we can do is transmit the Light as clearly and honestly and lovingly as we can. The stories of Jesus in the Gospels reflect the loving and generous nature of his message.

I treasure the words of William Penn, an early Quaker whose name was given to Pennsylvania: "The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion."

Richard Hilken

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